Getting the balance right: Policy recommendations for intervening upstream to prevent school exclusion in the context of Covid-19

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Recommendations for policy makers that will support the successful reintegration of children and young people as they return to education in schools, sixth form colleges, further education colleges, special schools and pupil referral units and mitigate the risks of exclusion.

Our previous report: *School exclusion risks after COVID-19* (Daniels, Thompson, Porter, Tawell and Emery 2020) gave vignettes of increased numbers of children and young people potentially at risk of formal, informal and self-exclusion.

The recommendations in this paper draw on feedback from conversations with 36 policy-makers, sector bodies, third sector representatives and practitioners primarily from England but also with policy-makers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The paper is linked to two further documents, *Seeking the balance* which summarises the feedback from the policy conversations and *Restoring the balance* that outlines the justifications for these policy recommendations.

The underlying principle that emerged was the benefits of policy development and implementation in reducing exclusions by intervening upstream to mitigate the risks and vulnerabilities identified using a range of strategies including early intervention, prevention and contextual safeguarding.

The feedback suggests that to mitigate exclusion risks, deliver the DfE's four pillars of attainment, attendance, safeguarding and wellbeing, foster inclusion, and meet the requirements of the 2010 Equality Act, policies need to:

- **Foster a nuanced understanding of vulnerability.** They should: a. recognise the diversity of children and young people including those whose pre-existing vulnerabilities have been overlaid with COVID-19, and those who have become vulnerable due to COVID-19, and b. embrace the risk factors, and children and young people's views on their needs, moving from a focus on vulnerable children and young people to focusing on vulnerable contexts. This can be supported through:
    - **Engaging with children and young people** using a Children's Rights based approach.
    - **Learning from the positive benefits for some children of *COVID-19* schooling** identifying implications for teaching and learning and the factors affecting sustainability.

- o **Producing granular, live data at both local and national levels** to monitor the movement of policy into practice including attendance across all types of settings, absences and exclusions.

♦ **Recognise and promote wellbeing as fundamental for all children and young people** to enable them to attend consistently, engage with learning to catch up and attain; and ensure continued safeguarding, including mitigating the risks of exploitation. **Policies need to foster long term, strategic approaches** which:
  - o **Communicate the principles and practice implications of the DfE pillars** in accessible, consistent and sustained ways across government departments, Local Authorities, Multi Academy Trusts, educational settings including all professions working with children and young people, schools and communities.
  - o **Take a joined up contextual approach to safeguarding and wellbeing** building on existing provision including mental health support, school nursing and designated safeguarding leads within schools and Violence Reduction Units working in local areas.
  - o **Support all schools to review their culture and values** within pedagogy, curriculum (including the arts and the implications of the Black Lives Matter movement) and pastoral care.
  - o **Develop guidance on whole school approaches to wellbeing** including social and emotional aspects of learning, understanding trauma and a focus on relationship building at all levels including supporting the wellbeing of teaching and support staff.
  - o **Provide evidence informed guidance, including a focus on prevention and early intervention** to support schools to adopt a holistic approach to contextual safeguarding.
  - o **Strengthen Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development and the availability of resources for understanding social and emotional aspects of learning,** trauma informed practice, approaches to supporting wellbeing and mental health.

♦ **Identify and resolve policy and practice contradictions** and acknowledge the way legislation is enacted within and across government departments and services at all levels including consideration of:
  - o **The means to resolve the existing fragmented, performance dominated system and bring existing disparate education structures and partners together to develop an effective middle tier** to ensure coherent, consistent and sustained support for vulnerable children and young people.
  - o **The policy and practice risks of the current accountability frameworks** and the pressure from the culture of high performance, zero tolerance and funding shortfalls.
  - o **Revise accountability frameworks in ways that promote wellbeing and collaboration.**
  - o **Develop collaborative support and challenge across services and partners** ensuring partners (including Local Authorities, Multi-Academy Trusts, youth offending and police services, social care and health services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services etc.) engage share data and are resourced.